

Which Narrative?

The Case of the Narrative Subject in Fifteenth-Century Altarpieces

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Pictorial Narrative

Art historians have generally treated narrative images as if the notion that images convey stories was self-evident.¹ Apparently the majority of scholars have found no reason to question the idea of pictorial narrative since in fact large categories of art, such as book illumination or fresco decoration in churches have been considered visual equivalents to the biblical stories since early medieval times.² According to a longstanding tradition both ancient and Christian imagery could be divided in two basic categories of narrative and iconic (or devotional) art.³ In the fifteenth century the same distinction between narrative and non-narrative images can be observed, for example, in contracts between artists and patrons. Likewise, writers and theologians commenting on art distinguished between the functions of narrative and non-narrative images.⁴ This tradition was carried over to the discipline of art history

1 Generally, art historians have not debated issues related to narrative theory and, as Wolfgang Kemp noted, art history has played a “very limited role” within the field of narratology. Likewise, Mieke Bal found that narratology was “not very popular” among art historians. Wendy Steiner’s recent statement that “the narrativity of pictures is virtually a nontopic for art historians” is, however, exaggerated and inaccurate (Kemp 1996, 68; Bal 1997, 161; Steiner 2004, 146).

2 Pope Gregory the Great wrote two letters in 599 and 600 defending the use of images in churches by referring to them as a kind of book for illiterate people. The idea was then repeated and paraphrased countless times by other writers all through the Middle Ages and beyond (Chazelle 1990).

3 In Italy, the categories were most frequently distinguished through the usage of the terms *imago* for the iconic image and *storia* (or *historia*) for the narrative image. See, among others, Settis 1979, 175–208 and more recently, Kessler 2000.

4 On the function of Christian imagery in medieval times, see, above all, the fundamental studies by Hans Belting (1981 and 1990), but also Anne Derbes (1996, esp. 1–34).

and contributed to the easy, but also vague and undefined way in which art history incorporated “narrative” into its terminology.

As a brief overview of some important contributions to the study of pictorial narrative quickly reveals, a problem of terminology underlies much of the debate. The earliest studies of narrative art were based on a formalistic methodology focusing on the visual qualities of the art works. Two studies from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century by Carl Robert and Franz Wickhoff represented attempts to both describe the evolution of narrative art in Antiquity and distinguish between different kinds of pictorial narration (Robert 1881; Wickhoff 1912). In 1947 Kurt Weitzmann further elaborated the methodological tools for structural analysis of narrative imagery and applied it on his study of manuscript illumination (Weitzmann 1947). Later scholars continued applying the same technique on material which depended on historical events rather than specific literary sources (Dawson 1944; Hamberg 1945; Swift 1951).

Common to all these early writers before the 1950s was the usage of “narrative” primarily to describe the style or method of the artist, but the term did not refer to a whole category of images as “storytelling pictures”. Furthermore, a “narrative image” could refer to a representation of any kind of action, an illustration of a literary text, a technique or a style. Until the 1950s, scholars, such as Wickhoff, Weitzmann, and others writing about pictorial narrative, also seem to have shared an implicit assumption that a written text always pre-existed the narrative image.⁵ “Narration”, “illustration” and “scene” were often used interchangeably. Thus, writers did not make any clear distinction between an image as an illustration of a text, an image as referring to a text and an image as telling a story in itself.

The problem of terminology is evident not only in the unsystematic way in which early art historians used the term “narrative”, but also in the difficulties encountered by those who have searched for a definition of pictorial narrative. The immense variety of images from ancient to modern times commonly referred to as “narrative” has led some scholars to suggest a more narrow usage of the term. The issue was first addressed in 1955 at a conference on narrative in ancient art, but the suggested restrictions on the usage of the term met with opposition.⁶ Drawing a strict line between narrative and non-narrative categories of images proved difficult, since it was evident that numerous images in ancient art do not contain enough visual information for us to decide in which category to place them.⁷ Instead, other

5 According to Weitzmann the task of a miniaturist was to “translate the content of a specific text into visual form as literally as possible.” Walter Lowrie plainly stated that “[a]ll pictures which represent subjects taken from the Bible may be called Biblical illustrations.”

6 Participants were asked to exclude from the category of narrative art casual or typical material, such as harvest scenes, and save the term narrative for representations of specific events, involving specific persons. Scholars of Egyptian and Babylonian art were thus left with very little “narrative” material to comment on. The papers held at the conference were published in *American Journal of Archaeology* 61 (e.g., von Blanckenhagen 1957; Hanfmann 1957; Kraeling 1957).

7 Hanfmann 1957, 72. More recently, Whitney Davis has argued that especially scholars of ancient art may have misinterpreted many narrative images labelling them instead “emblematic”, “decorative” or “allegorical” (Davis 1993, 20, note 1).

images from later periods open themselves to multiple interpretations. In extreme cases different interpretations of the same painting can vary on a scale from descriptive genre painting through allegory and narrative to pure illustration.⁸

Later attempts at defining “pictorial narrative” have been equally unsuccessful and there is still no consensus on the issue among art historians.⁹ As Julia K. Murray recently noted, the meaning of “narrative” in art history seems to depend on what is being set in opposition to it (Murray 1998, 605). A narrative image can be the opposite of an iconic, a timeless or a descriptive image. According to a strict definition of pictorial narrative, whole categories of painting, such as genre painting and allegories cannot be considered narrative, since they fail to meet the requirement of presenting a specific story.¹⁰ A definition of pictorial narrative therefore ultimately depends on how “story” is defined and how the relation between “story” and visual evidence is defined.¹¹

In reality, art historians have not only persisted in using the concept on a wide range of images, but also continuously used it in two different senses: narrative as illustration and narrative as located in the representation itself. Consequently, scholars analysing narrative qualities of images often face a choice between two alternative paths for their material: to consider the image in relation to a preconceived narrative text of some kind, or to consider the whole image as a self-sufficient narrative text. In the first case the image runs the risk of being reduced to mere illustration or being interpreted as a word for word translation of text into visual format. Choosing the second alternative might lead to a wide and inclusive category of narrative images, but also ultimately depends on a general and extended definition of the word “narrative”.¹²

While religious narrative imagery is frequently studied in relation to pre-existing literary texts – biblical, apocryphal, or near contemporary – the case of the narrative altarpiece opens up new questions. Representing a kind of hybrid image fusing narrative and non-narrative qualities in a single image, it took over the traditional function of the altarpiece while simultaneously presenting a narrative content to the

8 Famous examples from the Renaissance period demonstrating this type of ambiguity are Giorgione's *La Tempesta* [The Storm] and Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*.

9 In a rather straightforward fashion, a symposium on narrative art, held in 1984, acknowledged current trends in structuralist narratology by defining pictorial narrative as “the organized presentation of a specific action, set forth in a temporal progression and readable by the viewer.” Again, in the individual contributions participants did not follow this definition, nor did they agree on what precisely should count as a narrative image (Kessler and Shreve Simpson 1985, 8).

10 This runs counter to the practice of art historical analysis where both genre paintings and allegories are frequently used as examples of pictorial narrative, as Hans Belting does in his analysis of fourteenth-century allegorical frescoes (Belting 1985). For the definition of narrative as presenting something specific, rather than the general, typical, or ordinary (see Prince 1982, 148–161).

11 A definition of narrative art, currently offered in a dictionary defines it as “a visual representation of some kind of story, sometimes based on literary work.” Grove Art Online, <http://www.groveart.com>. This apparently “loose” definition carefully avoids any critical restrictions in the usage of the term.

12 A useful overview of some of the critical issues relating to the usage of “narrative” is provided by Marie-Laure Ryan in her entry for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative*, also available on the Internet address <http://lamar.colostate.edu/~pwryan/narrentry.htm>. See also Onega & García Landa 1996, 1–41 and Abbott 2002, 1–23.

viewer. The narrative altarpiece can therefore be used to highlight some of the issues ultimately deriving from the fact that the core of narrative theory is so firmly built on the analysis of verbal texts. To a large degree theories of narrative do not seem to be applicable on visual art or compatible with the way pictorial narrative is treated in art history. Perhaps unsurprisingly, scholars from neighbouring disciplines, mainly literary studies, have often expressed serious doubts concerning the possibilities of “telling a story” visually, and, at best, seem to admit only a limited degree of narrativity to non-verbal media such as images (Wolf 2003, 193). According to this view, the lacking or inferior ability of pictorial narrative to deal with the temporal dimension is a crucial deficiency that can only be partly overcome in the case of serial images or the particular case of so-called continuous narrative, when several events from the same story are depicted in a single image. Some art historians have accepted this view of pictorial narrative and, consequently, argued that images showing only one event from a story should not be considered narrative images in any sense.¹³ Other scholars have chosen their interpretative strategies according to the period or type of images they intend to discuss, and limiting the discussion to a particular type of painting, they have effectively avoided defining how narrative qualities in painting could be identified on a general level.¹⁴

The importance of addressing the issue of terminology and coming to terms with the confusing difficulties of defining “pictorial narrative”, becomes acute when trying to apply some of these arguments on fifteenth-century narrative altarpieces. Defining pictorial narrative as referring only to images representing more than one event questions the validity of calling something a “narrative altarpiece”, since they typically belong in the category of single-event images. As a concept, “narrative altarpiece” basically demonstrates an old narratological problem concerning where, or on what level, “story” is located.¹⁵ Rather than narrowing the debate by declaring “narrative altarpiece” an oxymoron, I would suggest a practical approach to the definition of “narrative” as a useful starting point. A narrative altarpiece is thus narrative in the sense that Brian Richardson described as “simply a way of reading a text, rather than a feature or essence found in a text”.¹⁶ Additionally, the narrative altarpiece, like every altarpiece, functioned in a context of devotional practices, which focused on contemplative, and thus non-narrative viewing of altarpieces. As the following

13 Among others, Kibédi Varga (1988), Steiner (1988), and Andrews (1998) do not consider the single narrative image as proper narrative, whereas Kemp (1996) and Kafalenos (1996) have presented alternative views. Werner Wolf (2003) suggested the term “quasi-narrative” for the single-event image.

14 Rather than give a definition of narrative, Patricia Fortini Brown, for example, in her study of narrative Venetian art, decided to include any kind of painting, which according to contemporary terminology was called *storia* in the category of narrative art (Fortini Brown 1988, 5).

15 We thus seem to return to the crucial issue whether a viewer should be able to construct a story on the basis of visual evidence alone, or whether “story” is something located somewhere outside the visual representation. In the latter case, the narrative altarpiece is conceived of as referring to a story, which already exists, and is known through other media, both literary and non-literary texts.

16 Richardson distinguished between four different definitions of “narrative” currently in use: the temporal, the causal, the minimal, and the transactional. The quotation refers to the last one (Richardson 2000, 160–170).

investigation will show, however, the narrative subject was equally associated with a strong narrative context based on a long tradition of narrative imagery in churches.

The Narrative Altarpiece

The rough division of religious imagery in two basic categories – the icon and the narrative image – is linked to the idea that religious images have two different functions: the icon is a cult image serving devotional purposes, whereas narrative images are primarily for instruction.¹⁷ Narrative images were expected to present the basic content of the Bible to the laity in a comprehensible and clear manner. In theory a devotional attitude was to be directed only at the iconic image. During the course of the later Middle Ages, however, religious imagery in churches, iconic as well as narrative, received new functions and the two categories can no longer be so neatly distinguished.¹⁸ Narrative as well as non-narrative images could be used for devotional purposes, and increasing numbers of both sculptures and painted panels came into the possession of religious orders and private citizens.¹⁹ An increasing emphasis on the humanity of Christ and his mother Mary mixed with a general tendency of late medieval art and spirituality to encourage a personal and emotionally engaging relation to Christianity. Altarpieces from the late medieval period forward reflected and participated in the process as well. They can be seen to serve the requirements of new groups of patrons in different ways, but most conspicuously in the choice of subject and through the inclusion of donor portraits or other details, such as identifiable, contemporary architectural setting.

Art historians have often stressed the link between Christian imagery and written text, but it has obscured the fact that narrative imagery in churches from the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance only rarely had to rely on written sources. All through the Middle Ages the basic material of biblical stories had been constantly expanded through the addition of apocryphal stories, theological writing and interpretation. All types of stories, biblical, hagiographical, apocryphal and legendary, were available to late medieval people in literary as well as non-literary forms. In a culture where knowledge was transmitted mainly orally the central content of the Bible was probably both heard and viewed (as presented in preachers' sermons, in

17 The second Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787 formulated the classic statement on the function of the icon. Icons were to be venerated because prayers directed at saintly figures were transferred to the prototype. Almost 800 years later the Council of Trent still referred back to this ancient defence of the Christian image. The Council of Trent further clarified that "by means of the histories of the mysteries of our Redemption, portrayed by paintings or other representations, the people is instructed, and confirmed in remembering, and continually revolving in mind the articles of faith." For the full text of the Council of Trent, see <http://www.intratext.com/y/ENG0432.HTM>.

18 Among others, Kees van der Ploeg and Beth Williamson have recently discussed the function of religious imagery in churches (Ploeg 1997; Williamson 2004).

19 During the past decade, scholars such as Jeffrey Hamburger and Anabel Thomas have extensively investigated the function of images within the context of religious orders.

performances of sacred drama or in visual art) before being internalized through reading, if one knew how to read. “Visual versions” of the biblical stories were therefore to a great extent dependent on conventions of pictorial narrative and more generally, on a religious culture established during earlier centuries.

The history of the icon and its entrance into the liturgical space of the altar has not been entirely clarified, but generally it can be considered a phenomenon of the later Middle Ages (Boskovits 1992; Gardner 1994). The painted panel placed above the altar primarily depicted one or several sacred figures, but small-scale narrative images were occasionally grouped around the central image.²⁰ Narrative images could thus be part of an altarpiece, but not as the main focus of attention at the centre of the altarpiece. The main subject nearly always depended on the dedication of the altar, the chapel or the church.²¹ Additional saints often referred to specific preferences of the donor or the receiving institution. With some notable exceptions, such as the *Crucifixion*, the *Annunciation*, the *Assumption*, and the *Coronation of the Virgin*, altars were dedicated to saints rather than events, and altarpieces were thus first and foremost iconic images of saints. Generally, the iconic character and function of the altarpiece remained the same when the new Renaissance type of altarpiece with a unified picture field was introduced during the course of the fifteenth century.²²

Some narrative subjects, most frequently those related to important liturgical feasts, had appeared as main subjects of altarpieces already in the fourteenth century, but during the fifteenth century this repertoire of narrative subjects gradually expanded.²³ Particularly towards the end of the fifteenth century narrative altarpieces became increasingly common (Meilman 2000, 27–51). Clearly the number of narrative subjects considered appropriate for a prestigious location at the altar was still limited, but at the centre of an altarpiece some narrative subjects received a new authoritative status. In addition, the new location necessarily involved a process of adjustment, since the altarpiece was traditionally the prime location for the non-narrative image. The narrative altarpiece thus retained its association with a narrative context while simultaneously incorporating new features into the image

20 There is considerable variety in the way narrative images were attached to an icon depending on format and original usage. For example, triptychs often had narrative images in the side wings, which could be opened or closed. Some of the earliest altarpieces to have survived reflected the composition of an antependium, and may originally have been used as such, with rows of small narrative images on either side of an iconic image of Christ or a saint. For a brief but useful overview with some of the most well-known examples (see Belli D'Elia 1994).

21 Obviously, some standard subjects, such as the *Madonna with the Christ Child* or a *Crucifixion* were always appropriate for an altarpiece, regardless of the dedication of the altar. Additionally it should be noted that altars were frequently dedicated to more than one saint.

22 Polyptychs showing a row of standing saints were being produced well into the sixteenth century, but in areas such as Tuscany, the Renaissance type of altarpiece became the dominating form already during the second half of the fifteenth century. A useful overview is given in Humfrey 1987.

23 The first one who brought attention to this trend within the genre of altarpieces was Jacob Burckhardt in his posthumously published *Das Altarbild* (1898), translated into English in 1988 (see also Aronberg Lavin 1990, 253, note 57).

more associated with the devotional, non-narrative function of the altarpiece.²⁴ Evidently such an image carried a meaning far beyond the illustrative. Sharing the traditional function of the non-narrative altarpiece, therefore, the narrative altarpiece did not demand a narrative reading as the only alternative.

When a narrative subject for an altarpiece was extracted from the *Life of Christ* or the *Life of the Virgin*, it inevitably represented an image which was already more than familiar to most viewers from a wider narrative context. In such a context, the primary function would have been to evoke in the mind of the viewer an appropriate story from the Gospels. However, narrative images were also meant to invite the viewer to contemplate the basic doctrines and mysteries of the Christian faith, since the fundamental stories of the Bible were more than a piece of history. The stories were also about Christian theology and doctrine, and this added an important level of symbolism to any narrative representation (see Kemp 1996). Depending on audience, different visual narratives could have been interpreted on scale varying from the simple grasping of some key events to a highly sophisticated elaboration of the symbolic content.

In many cases, not only was the story familiar to the viewer, but also the pictorial conventions guiding any visual representation of this story were common knowledge. On the elementary level, it did not require a complex process of interpretation to set a series of images into its proper context.²⁵ It did require, however, a certain amount of “filling in the gaps”, although basically no different from a range of interpretative strategies used in the reading of other types of texts (Abbott 2002, 79–90, 114–115). Precisely the fact that a viewer has to know the story in order to “read” a limited number of images as a narrative has been used as an argument for the weak narrative quality of visual imagery (Chatman 1975, 315). In other words, it would not be possible to extract a coherent and accurate story on the basis of visual evidence alone. We need to know first which story the image is referring to. This is arguably correct, but only if we assume that a viewer is obligated to construct a “correct” story, or the story intended by the artist, rather than construct any possible narrative. Moreover, visual qualities often seem to be quite sufficient to suggest a narrative reading, even when we are unable to identify a specific story. As David Rudrum has recently pointed out, identifying something as narrative also depends on social conventions (Rudrum 2005, 199–200). Consequently, even a single image, which on the basis of visual qualities seems to be narrative, is enough to give the viewer an option, but not an obligation to read it in narrative terms.

In the case of Christian imagery, the Bible rarely contained more than a few lines of text concerning an individual event, whereas the image, from the fourteenth century onwards, became greatly enriched with iconographic details, including

24 A narrative subject could, for example, be combined with a representation of saints from a different context, as in Filippo Lippi's *Coronation of the Virgin* (1441–1447, Uffizi, Florence) or as in Filippino Lippi's altarpiece in the Carafa Chapel (1489–91, Santa Maria sopra Minerva, Rome), which combines an *Annunciation* with St. Thomas of Aquinas presenting the cardinal to the Virgin.

25 This would resemble what Richard Brilliant thought of as viewers becoming “their own narrators, changing the images into some form of internalized verbal expression” (Brilliant 1984, 16).

additional figures, a detailed background and architectural setting. Gestures and facial expressions added further emotional content to the narrative (see, among others, Belting 1985). These additions did not depend on the biblical narrative, but were more in tune with contemporary devotional literature. To be sure, by the later Middle Ages, a narrative image did more than merely recall a familiar story from memory. It significantly added to the content of that story through visualising what in narrative theory has been termed the “storyworld”.²⁶

If a narrative image is identified through its ability to evoke not merely a sequence of events in the mind of the viewer, but an emotionally engaging storyworld, then religious imagery seems particularly well suited to perform the task. In the fifteenth century, devotional practices were specifically aimed at bringing the sacred stories close to the reality of the contemporary viewer.²⁷ Artists employed sophisticated techniques to include the viewer as an implied witness to, or even a participant in, the story, and all religious imagery was meant to invite imaginative and emotional responses. Thus the majority of church art was meant to be more than merely looked at. The audience these works were originally intended for would presumably have spent a considerable amount of time in front of them. These were images that men and women saw repeatedly all through their lives and perhaps, at times of distress, spent hours in front of. As people were accustomed to use images as a focus for prayer, and liturgical activity took place at an altar, images in the vicinity of the altar would have received particular attention.

Considering that narrative, ultimately, seems to be something happening in the mind of the viewer, it can only be achieved if the viewer is ready to respond in such a way.²⁸ As a unique physical object, an altarpiece also contained qualities which were unrelated to its content; altarpieces were made of precious materials and displayed inside highly decorative frameworks. The visual and material qualities of an altarpiece were an inseparable part of the way they functioned inside a liturgical space. Altarpieces represented important and prestigious commissions for both patrons and artists and were thus also meant to fulfil decorative and aesthetic functions as part of the “embellishment” of the church interior. The visual and material qualities of any object located in the church interior were therefore a matter of serious consideration, and this affected their process of production.

Nevertheless, precisely because both material and spiritual values were at stake, the choice of subject for an altarpiece was also a result of careful reflection. The

26 David Herman defined “storyworlds” as “mental models of who did what to and with whom, when where, why and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate [...] as they work to comprehend a narrative” (Herman 2002, 5).

27 Devotional texts, such as the well-known *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, encouraged emotional involvement and in visual imagery details, such as figures in contemporary costumes and familiar surroundings, specifically aimed at locating sacred narratives closer to the reality of the viewer. Likewise, famous preachers such as Bernardino da Siena used works of art familiar to his audience to exemplify specific points of his sermons (Bolzoni 2004, 136–144).

28 On this issue, see Elkins 1991. Reformulating a statement by Roland Barthes, Peter Holliday has likewise emphasized that “an image becomes a visual narrative – an object of narrative reading – only when the intention of such a reading exists” (Holliday 1993, 3).

narrative image, isolated from a narrative series, enlarged to fit the proportions of an altarpiece, and raised to the authoritative location of an altar, was simultaneously imbued with a new kind of communicative power. Why should a particular narrative image be given this kind of status, if not for the fact that both patron and audience valued the specific qualities of narrative imagery? In isolation the narrative altarpiece opened up a possibility of multiple readings. In the process of production, on the other hand, a strong sense of what was appropriate in an altarpiece acted as a modifying and restraining force.

Art historical surveys and artist monographs usually do not treat altarpieces separately from other works of art of the same period or by the same artist. Since the 1980s, however, the altarpiece as a genre has received more attention than before.²⁹ To a great extent research has emphasized stylistic comparison, features of innovation and technique, and has successfully been used to clarify questions related to attribution, dating and reconstruction of dismembered altarpieces. In earlier art historical writing new and unusual features of altarpieces were often connected to the creative skills of the individual artist, but during the past two decades archival research, iconology, theology and social history have contributed to shift the attention towards a contextual interpretation of altarpiece projects (Nagel 1995; Williamson 2004, 341–380). The production and final appearance of an altarpiece is now seen as being influenced by a number of factors in response to the desires of both artist and patron, involving also ecclesiastical authorities and matters of tradition and local culture. As Patricia Meilman has recently pointed out, the choice of subject for an altarpiece was not accidental, and a narrative subject in particular was not an ordinary choice (Meilman 2000, 27–31).

Among others, scholars such as William Hood, Peter Humfrey and Megan Holmes have demonstrated that subjects for altarpieces were chosen very carefully and modified according to a perceived audience – an audience, it has been argued, that was well equipped to understand and enjoy symbolic content, and specifically attuned to religious interpretation (Hood 1993; Humfrey 1993; Holmes 1999). The focus of investigation in the field of altarpieces has thus turned towards the role of the viewer, or audience, whose task it was to read, to grasp or imagine the story visually represented in images. This audience was as diversified in historical periods as it would be today and, inevitably, the most sophisticated layers of meaning would not have been relevant to more than a highly educated minority of viewers. As a subject for altarpieces, *The Visitation* is a case in point, since on a general level the story could be communicated to a wide audience. As part of the canonical text of the Bible it must have been a familiar story to any late medieval viewer. However, as a close examination of both written sources and visual tradition surrounding

29 After the pioneering essay by Burckhardt (see note 27), the contributions of Braun (1924) and Hager (1962) were fundamental. Besides a number of important articles, two collections of essays based on conferences held in the late 1980s (Humfrey & Kemp 1990; Superbi Gioffredi & Borsook 1994) initiated a renewed interest in the study of altarpieces, which has been followed by important studies of the altarpiece in Venice (Humfrey 1993) and Siena (van Os, van der Ploeg & Aronow 1988/1990).

the cult of the Visitation will show, this brief narrative contained a deeper meaning which could be uniquely highlighted at the centre of an altarpiece.

The Visitation

The *Visitation* refers to both a narrative in the Gospel of Luke and a particular Marian feast of the Catholic Church, but also indicates an important subject in private devotion representing, for example, one of the major mysteries of the Rosary.³⁰ Furthermore, since the early Middle Ages, the *Visitation* appears as a subject in works of art and objects of every shape and material, such as mosaics, frescos, book illumination, and altarpieces (see, for example, Schiller 1966, figs. 54, 55, 56, 58, 59, 60, 63, 65, 67, 76, 99 and 111). In altarpieces, the *Visitation* was first introduced as a complementary subject on smaller panels located beside or underneath the main panel. Apart from a single example from the last decade of the fourteenth century, the *Visitation* becomes a subject on the main panel of the altarpiece only towards the end of the fifteenth century.³¹

As a biblical narrative the *Visitation* had been the subject of commentary and interpretation since the early medieval period.³² The basic theological significance of the story was well established by the time the religious culture of the later Middle Ages expanded the content of the story and added new meaning to it. The emergence of the *Visitation* as a subject for altarpieces is, moreover, intimately associated with the introduction of an official *Feast of the Visitation* into the liturgical calendar of the Catholic Church in 1389.³³ In this cultural context, the appearance of altarpieces of the *Visitation* visually manifested the end of a long process involving religious piety, church politics and the activity of religious orders, particularly the Dominicans. In the fifteenth century, therefore, the *Visitation* had evolved to something much more than a short narrative in the Gospel of Luke.

According to Luke, the story, briefly summarized, recounts how Mary, immediately after the angel Gabriel had revealed to her the mystery of the Incarnation, went to visit her elderly relative Elisabeth. Both women were miraculously pregnant, and Elisabeth was soon to be the mother of John the Baptist. As Mary reached the

30 Luke 1:39–57. Recent exegetical commentary can be found in Bovon, Francois 2002 (*Luke 1: a commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*. Trans. Christine M. Thomas, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 54–65). See also entry under “Heimsuchung” in *Marienlexikon* 1991, vol. 3, 117–121 (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag).

31 In all likelihood the earliest altarpiece showing the Visitation at the centre is the altarpiece by Bartolo di Fredi from 1397, originally executed for a chapel in the Sienese church of San Domenico (Freuler 1987).

32 For a brief summary of some of the medieval commentators’ writings, see Vincke 1997, 10–23.

33 The papal bull *Super benignitas* was signed by Pope Urban VI, 6 April 1389, but due to his death published by his successor Boniface IX, 9 November the same year. Because this occurred during the Great Schism of the Catholic Church, the feast was not adopted in those regions which were loyal to the rivaling pope in Avignon. On the link between the introduction of the feast and the appearance of the Visitation in altarpieces (see Freuler 1987).

house of Zechariah, and the two women greeted each other, the child in Elisabeth's womb "leaped" and Elisabeth recognised Mary as the mother of Christ.³⁴ The movement of John the Baptist in his mother's womb was interpreted as an effect of the radiating presence of Christ in the womb of Mary. At this moment Christ sanctified John the Baptist.³⁵ The meeting between the two women was thus to a great extent, or perhaps essentially, the very first meeting between Christ and his precursor. The narrative ends with a simple statement that Mary stayed with Zechariah and Elisabeth for three months and then returned to her house.

Like the story of the *Annunciation*, the *Visitation* is both part of sacred history and in itself a mystery involving divine intervention. The importance of this brief story for early medieval theologians is clarified by the fact that it is simultaneously part of three separate but intertwined stories: first of all, it is part of the story of Christ's birth and childhood. It follows directly on the story of the *Annunciation*, and both these stories are embedded in the longer story about the birth of John the Baptist.³⁶ The same angel, who appeared before Mary, had already visited Zechariah in the temple, and Elisabeth's subsequent pregnancy is presented to Mary as an example of the almighty power of God. Additionally, the parallel birth narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus are carefully constructed on multiple associations to Old Testament passages concerning appropriate prophecies and miraculous births.³⁷ Finally, the narrative of the *Visitation* is an important event in the life of the Virgin and thus part of her story, too. This story, of course, could not be constructed on the basis of the information found in the Gospels, but relied mainly on apocryphal sources.

Apart from being included in these larger narratives, the *Visitation* in itself has a beginning – Mary leaving her home in Nazareth – a crucial moment in the middle – the meeting between the two women – and a clear ending – Mary returning to her home.³⁸ Visually, this narrative is nearly always compressed to the moment

34 According to the Gospel of Luke, Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost at the moment she heard the voice of Mary and cried out: "Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb! How have I deserved that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

35 Before the arrival of Mary an angel had already appeared to Zechariah stating that John the Baptist would be blessed while still in his mother's womb (Luke 1:15). The idea that John the Baptist expressed his recognition of Christ through the movement in his mother's womb can be found already in the writings of Hippolytus of Rome (170–236) in his *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, 45. For the full text, see <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/hippolytus.html>.

36 The story of the Visitation can be construed as the junction point where the two parallel narratives of the annunciations and births of Christ and his Precursor intersect. Elisabeth as the mother of the last great prophet represents the old covenant and Mary the coming of a New Age.

37 The most explicit parallel could be drawn to 2 Sam: 6–11. Like the Ark of the Covenant was brought to the house of Obed-Edom, where it remained for three months blessing the entire household, Mary was the Ark of the New Covenant, the sacred shrine of the Lord, who remained with Elisabeth for three months.

38 The narrative additionally includes two canticles praising the joy and power of God's grace. In particular, the *Magnificat* became immensely important in later Catholic culture and visual representations of the *Madonna of the Magnificat* appeared from the fourteenth century forward. On the demand for narrative closure when narrativizing historical events, see White 1981.

when the two women greet each other.³⁹ In other words, it is a narrative image depicting what G. E. Lessing described as “the instant [of a story] that is most laden with significance”.⁴⁰ Until it became a subject for altarpieces, the *Visitation* usually appeared among images showing the life of Christ, the life of John the Baptist or the life of the Virgin. In the repertoire of Christian imagery, it is the only subject that can appear in three different narrative contexts. While the *Visitation* would most typically be placed next to an image of the *Annunciation*, in cycles depicting the life of John the Baptist, the image would usually follow the *Annunciation to Zechariah in the Temple*. In cycles concerning either Christ or Mary a *Birth of Christ* would usually follow the *Visitation*. Both as separate images and as a series the *Annunciation*, the *Visitation*, and the *Birth of Christ* could be taken to represent the mystery of the Incarnation.

In its most elementary form the *Visitation* is a simple image showing two women greeting each other, or standing just slightly turned toward each other.⁴¹ There are no angles, no divine light, in fact nothing to indicate that this is anything but an ordinary meeting between a young woman and an older relative. The miraculous event occurring at this meeting – the invisible communication between Christ and John the Baptist – cannot be represented visually, at least in realistic terms. If the artist abandoned realism, however, Christ and John the Baptist could very well be included in the image as, in fact, they were in many northern European images of the *Visitation* from the fourteenth and fifteenth century (see Urner-Astholz 1981). This type of iconography does not seem to have had any influence on Italian art. Even the visible signs of pregnancy are often left out completely or only discretely alluded to.

While the basic story of the *Visitation* in the Gospel of Luke was very brief, the immense theological importance of the event ensured that the narrative gradually became greatly expanded through the addition of significant details. For example, the fact that Mary stayed in the house of Zechariah for three months seemed also to indicate that Mary could have been present at the birth of John the Baptist. According to a commonly held belief, the Virgin was indeed the first one to hold the newborn Baptist in her arms, and in visual representations of the event she is sometimes included among the figures around Elisabeth’s bedside.⁴² In images of the *Visitation* from the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance Mary is often accompanied by

39 Images showing any other moment of the story than the meeting are extremely rare, but not entirely absent in late medieval and Renaissance art. The fresco cycle in the oratory of San Giovanni in Urbino (1416) by Lorenzo and Jacopo Salimbeni, for example, includes not only the image of the women greeting each other, but also images of Mary greeting Zechariah and Mary leaving the house of Elisabeth and Zechariah.

40 Quotation and translation in Kemp 1996, 64. See also Kemp’s comments on “compressed pictorial narrative.”

41 Examples include the sculpted figures decorating portals of the thirteenth century cathedrals of Rheims and Chartres, a fourteenth-century stained glass window at Chartres, and the illuminated Hours of Jeanne d’Évreux (1324–28).

42 One such example is the fresco cycle of the *Life of John the Baptist* mentioned in note 55. In an even earlier example, c. 1334, Mary is holding the swaddled child in the *Naming of John the Baptist* (bronze doors, Baptistery, Florence). A late example is the *Birth of John the Baptist* by Tintoretto (1540s), where Mary is shown presenting the baby to the wet nurse (The Hermitage, St. Petersburg).

other female figures and occasionally by Joseph, her husband.⁴³ The inclusion of additional figures significantly added to the creation of a “storyworld” surrounding the narrative, and focused attention on bystanders and witnesses to the event.

It is important to clarify the role of pictorial conventions underlying visual representations of the *Visitation* because these conventions strongly influenced the way the subject was later depicted in altarpieces. Amplifying the composition with new details must also be viewed in the context of contemporary culture. The idea that Mary would have undertaken a dangerous journey over the mountains all on her own was incompatible with efforts to bring the biblical narratives closer to the world of a late medieval worshipper. Bringing Joseph into the narrative of the *Visitation*, furthermore, reflected the growing cult of St. Joseph and the concept of the *Holy Family*. While the basic iconography of the *Visitation* established during the early medieval period did not undergo any significant changes during the late medieval period, the difference in age between the two women became more pronounced as time progressed. Another innovation was the late medieval iconographic type showing Elisabeth kneeling or leaning forward in front of the Virgin, a feature which clearly marked the mother of Christ as superior to the mother of John the Baptist.⁴⁴ In Northern European art, landscape became the dominating background already in the fifteenth century, whereas Italian artists showed more urban settings, and also located the meeting closer to the house of Zechariah.

According to Luke, Mary entered the house of Zechariah before greeting Elisabeth, but already early medieval images are ambiguous about locating the event inside a house, and it soon became an established convention that the meeting took place outside Zechariah’s house.⁴⁵ Such deviations from the canonical text of the Bible demonstrate that in visual representation the narrative content was frequently elaborated independently from the textual source. In almost complete contrast, therefore, to what is actually stated in the biblical text, the meeting between Mary and Elisabeth often takes place outside the house of Zechariah with not one or two, but several people present at the event.⁴⁶ The extended number of figures is a typical

43 Joseph is seen accompanying the Virgin in the small panel with scenes from the *Life of John the Baptist* by Deodato di Orlando (1280s, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin), in the fresco by Pinturicchio (1492–95, Sala dei Santi, Appartamenti Borgia, Vatican), and in sixteenth-century paintings by artists such as Titian, Tintoretto, and Luca Giordano.

44 The earliest example of an ever so slight differentiation in status between Mary and Elisabeth appears on the bronze doors of the cathedral of Monreale, executed by Bonanno di Pisa 1186. Vincke 1997, fig. 11.

45 Apart from some rare early medieval examples, representing small, decorative images in ivory (see Vincke 1997, figs. 7 and 10), I have not come across images of the *Visitation* taking place inside a building.

46 *The Visitation* in the north transept of the lower church of San Francesco in Assisi dated to the early fourteenth century depicts the Virgin with four companions and an additional servant waiting in the house of Elisabeth. In the fifteenth century Ghirlandaio (1486–90, Santa Maria Novella, Florence) and Pinturicchio (1492–95, Sala dei Santi, Appartamento Borgia, Vatican) increased the number of figures even more, and in the sixteenth century, artists such as Francesco Salviati (1538, Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato, Rome) and Jacopo Pontormo (1516, SS. Annunziata, Florence) created compositions where Mary and Elisabeth are surrounded by a crowd of people.

feature in images that belong to monumental fresco cycles. In this type of imagery the emphasis was evidently on the representation of sacred history rather than on the private mystery of the *Visitation*. Significantly, the introduction of the *Visitation* in altarpieces brought with it a reorientation towards the mystery contained in the narrative. This reorientation had its roots in late medieval mysticism focusing on the pregnancy of Mary and the time that Christ dwelled in the womb of his mother.⁴⁷

In monastic environments, primarily Cistercian monasteries, devotion towards the Virgin took the form of pious contemplation relating to every detail concerning the mystery of the Incarnation, including the perfectly pure body and womb of the Virgin (see, among others, Atkinson 1991 and Fein 1996). The unique combination of virginity and motherhood meant that Mary was totally unlike any other woman, and altarpieces showing the *Annunciation* or the *Birth of Christ* did not represent ordinary events. However, compared to the miraculous conception and birth of Christ, Mary's pregnancy seemed to resemble the experience of ordinary women. The time that Christ dwelled in the womb of his mother was interpreted as a period of joy and happiness in the life of the Virgin.⁴⁸ Devotion towards the pregnant Madonna thus contributed in locating the narrative of the *Visitation* more firmly in the life story of the Virgin. Consequently, when the *Feast of the Visitation* was introduced in 1389, it became a new Marian feast, rather than a feast of Christ. As a Marian feast it perfectly reflected the late medieval obsession with the motherhood of Mary and, above all, the exceptional purity of her body. Used as a vehicle for contemplating Christ in his humanity, the *Visitation* was gradually allowed to acquire an independent role in devotional practices.

In Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, images of the *Visitation* date back to the early Middle Ages. The extraordinary possibility of including the *Visitation* in different narrative contexts relating to Christ, the Virgin, or John the Baptist is demonstrated by the great variety and dissemination of *Visitation* imagery in Italy from the late medieval period forward.⁴⁹ Buildings particularly related to John the Baptist, such as the baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence, could present multiple images of the *Visitation*, both inside and outside the building.⁵⁰ The *Visitation* was also incorporated into crowded compositions on sculpted pulpits in the cathedrals of Siena and

47 On the theme of the pregnant Virgin in late medieval art, see Lechner 1981 and Cesàreo 2000.

48 In the widespread devotional work *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* (originally mid-fourteenth century) the *Visitation* is listed as second among the seven joys of the Virgin. Likewise, Saint Birgitta of Sweden, in her own revelation of the *Visitation* emphasized the theme of joy and wonder (*Revelaciones*, Book VI, chapter 59, full text available at <http://www.umilta.net/bk6.html>).

49 The dissertations on *Visitation* iconography by Kristin Vincke (1997) and Lisa Kiefer (2001) contain only a limited number of examples from the period 1200–1600 but, nevertheless, show the variety in material, size, context, and location of *Visitation* imagery in Italy during this period.

50 The *Visitation* was included among the images on the bronze door by Nicola Pisano, in the late thirteenth-century mosaics of the ceiling, and in the late fifteenth century, on the left side of the silver altar, and embroidered on the new and sumptuously decorated liturgical vestments worn by the clergy serving the baptistery. The silver altar and fragments of the textiles are presently in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence.

Pisa and in the church of San Giovanni Fuorcivitas in Pistoia.⁵¹ In Florence, the *Visitation* was, furthermore, part of the fresco decoration of the Baroncelli chapel at Santa Croce painted by Taddeo Gaddi 1328–30, and from the early decades of the following century, the *Visitation* appeared on predella panels underneath the main panel in altarpieces by Lorenzo Monaco and Fra Angelico.⁵²

Even a brief list of examples, such as those mentioned above, easily demonstrates that by the end of the fifteenth century, the *Visitation* was a common and widespread subject in the context of religious imagery. However, all of these images represented the *Visitation* in a clear narrative context, as part of a series of images rather than in an isolated form as a devotional image. To my knowledge, before the 1490s, no altarpiece in Florence depicted the *Visitation* as the main or only subject, although in Siena, the first *Visitation* altarpiece appeared as early as 1397.⁵³ The fresco decoration of the main chapel at Santa Maria Novella by Domenico Ghirlandaio and his workshop in 1486–90 therefore represented a significant addition to *Visitation* imagery in Florence.⁵⁴ Here the subject was interpreted on an unprecedented monumental scale in a web of symbolic references, and in the context of the life of John the Baptist.

It may not be a coincidence that the *Visitation* was so prominently displayed in the church of Santa Maria Novella, since precisely in this period the *Visitation* was introduced in Florence as a subject for altarpieces. In all likelihood the two altarpieces by Domenico Ghirlandaio (fig.1 *The Visitation*, Louvre, Paris) and Piero di Cosimo (fig. 2 *The Visitation with Saints Nicholas of Bari and Anthony Abbott*, The National Gallery of Art, Washington) respectively, are the earliest preserved altarpieces of this subject in Florence.⁵⁵ In fact, the altarpiece by Ghirlandaio was painted

51 The late medieval pulpits were sculpted by Nicola and Giovanni Pisano and Fra Guglielmo. The church of San Giovanni Fuorcivitas (Pistoia) became a centre for the cult of the Visitation already in the early fifteenth century when a confraternity by that name gathered in the church (Bacci 1906, 5–6). A sculpture of the *Visitation*, still in the church, has been attributed to either Luca or Andrea della Robbia and, depending on attribution, has been dated between 1445 and ca. 1510.

52 One of the predella panels (1406–1410) by Lorenzo Monaco, is in the Courtauld Institute Galleries (London), and another predella painting is part of the *Annunciation* altarpiece in the Bartolini Salimbeni chapel (1420–25) in the church of S. Trinità (Florence). Fra Angelico likewise included the *Visitation* in the predella paintings of at least three *Annunciation* altarpieces (Museo Diocesano, Cortona; Museo del Prado, Madrid; Santuario di S Maria delle Grazie, San Giovanni Valdarno)

53 The special circumstances surrounding this commission have been analysed by Gaudenz Freuler (1987). In Siena, this altarpiece was followed by two *Visitation* altarpieces (Pinacoteca Nazionale), which both have been recently attributed to Pietro di Francesco degli Orioli. Following the new attribution they are currently dated between late 1480s and early 1490s.

54 The bibliography on this commission is extensive. An updated version can be found in Cadogan 2000.

55 I have not come across any reference either to an altarpiece of the *Visitation* or an altar dedicated to the *Visitation* in Florence dated earlier than these altarpieces. However, the sculpture mentioned in note 69 has been dated to 1445, provided the attribution to Luca della Robbia is accepted. A panel by Bicci di Lorenzo, dated 1435 (Museo Diocesano, Velletri) does, in fact, show the *Visitation* as a single image, but the panel seems to originate from a polyptych (or triptych), although subsequently placed above an altar in the cathedral of Velletri (Ercolani 1988, 57–58). Interestingly, the Sienese altarpieces mentioned in note 70, from the same period as the altarpieces by Ghirlandaio and Piero di Cosimo, support the impression that the period around 1490 marks the beginning of a veritable



Figure 1. Domenico Ghirlandaio: *The Visitation*. Louvre, Paris.
(Photo RMN/© Jean-Gilles Berizzi)

for a chapel belonging to the same family for whom he had worked at Santa Maria Novella.⁵⁶ Those responsible for commissioning the altarpiece by Piero di Cosimo represented another important Florentine family, and the historical circumstances surrounding the commissions have been dealt with in recent monographs on the artists.⁵⁷ The purpose of this article is not to comment on the complex relationship

flowering of the cult of the *Visitation*. Several altarpieces were subsequently produced in Florence and elsewhere in the period between the late 1490s and late 1520s, notably by artists such as Mariotto Albertinelli, Francesco Salviati, Jacopo Pontormo, Sebastiano del Piombo and Titian.

56 The altarpiece was originally in the Cistercian church of Santa Maria Maddalena di Cestello. Lorenzo Tornabuoni, who commissioned the altarpiece, was the son of Giovanni Tornabuoni, the patron of the main chapel at Santa Maria Novella. For a history of the family, see Pampaloni 1968.

57 Piero di Cosimo worked for the Capponi family, who, like Ghirlandaio's patrons the Tornabuoni family, belonged to the highest elite of the city. This altarpiece was originally in the church of Santo Spirito, a major Florentine church belonging to the Augustinian Hermits. For Piero di Cosimo, see Forlani Tempesti & Capretti 1996, 104–105, with bibliography. For Ghirlandaio, see Cadogan 2000, 262–263, with bibliography.



Figure 2. Piero di Cosimo: *The Visitation with Saints Nicholas of Bari and Anthony Abbott*. The National Gallery of Art, Washington. (From Bacci, Mina 1976. *L'opera completa di Piero di Cosimo*. Milano: Rizzoli Editore.)

between artists, patrons and religious orders in this period, but it should be noted, however, that altarpieces destined for private chapels nearly always display some reference to the patron of the chapel. In this case, both altarpieces reflected not only the personal choices of their patrons, but may additionally have been accommodated to suit the needs of the monks and friars responsible for the churches.⁵⁸ Apart from the multifaceted social and historical background, the altarpieces are interesting from another point of view as well. As narrative images of the *Visitation*

⁵⁸ As the Tornabuoni chapel at Cestello commemorated a young woman, who had died during her second pregnancy, the theme of the *Visitation*, so intimately related to pregnancy, must have been regarded as highly appropriate, although other motivations might also have influenced the choice of subject. The stained glass window of the chapel, nevertheless, contained an image of St. Laurence, Lorenzo Tornabuoni's patron saint (Cadogan 2000, 262–263). The other altarpiece by Piero di Cosimo included an image of St. Nicholas of Bari, who was especially venerated by members of the Capponi family. Several members of the family were named after the saint, and the family had a chapel dedicated to St. Nicholas already in the old church of Santo Spirito (Forlani Tempesti & Capretti, 1996, 105). For an interpretation of how Augustinian ideals may be reflected in the composition of Piero di Cosimo's altarpiece, see Capretti 1996, 45–51.

they were both part of a long and by now familiar tradition of *Visitation* imagery, and at the same time they count among the earliest examples of the *Visitation* situated in a new context of devotional images. Both artists were thus faced with the challenge of transferring and accommodating the *Visitation* to the format of the altarpiece. The process of transforming narrative into icon involved some significant changes, which affected the reading and function of the altarpiece. In the last part of this article, my intention is to focus on the way these early *Visitation* altarpieces functioned as vehicles for narrative reading.

First of all, the two altarpieces share some significant features. They are of approximately the same size and represent the popular late fifteenth-century type of *tavola quadrata*, i.e. a nearly square-sized altarpiece consisting of a single picture field. Both altarpieces were planned to suit the architectural surrounding of the chapels, although probably not as part of a coherent program incorporating every altarpiece in the respective churches.⁵⁹ The meeting between Mary and Elisabeth is depicted at the centre of the panel, and in both cases two other figures are included in the image as well. In the Ghirlandaio altarpiece, Mary Jacobi and Mary Salome are witnessing the event, whereas in the other case, two saints (St. Nicholas and St. Anthony Abbot) are seated in the foreground in front of the women. In both altarpieces, a feeling of intimacy is highlighted through looks and gestures as the women reveal their miraculous pregnancies to us, the viewers.

Furthermore, in both cases the environment where the meeting takes place is very ambiguously rendered. Piero di Cosimo seems to locate the event outside, but nowhere near the house of Zechariah. As noted by Elena Capretti, the figures are, in fact, standing as if in the middle of a performance on a stage (Capretti 1996, 47–48). Ghirlandaio, on the other hand, situates the meeting in front of a portal, which opens up to a view of the landscape in the background.⁶⁰ Looking at the foreground, the kind of detailed architectural setting, which is a typical feature of fifteenth-century narrative fresco cycles, is largely absent from both altarpieces. In other words, the artists seem to have reduced precisely those descriptive details, which were usually employed to make the narrative of the *Visitation* come to life in the mind of the viewer.

Instead of precisely defined surroundings, both painters have placed the figures close to the foreground and added a pair of saints from a very different context. These additional figures are clearly meant to be included in our reading of the image. But already at this point two alternatives are offered. We can choose to

59 For the history of the church of Santa Maria Maddalena di Cestello, see Luchs 1977 and Kecks 2000, 353–354. For a history of the Augustinian Hermits in Florence and the church of Santo Spirito, see the comprehensive collection of articles in Acidini Luchinat & Capretti 1996. Both altarpieces were commissioned in connection with extensive building projects and were incorporated into brand new architectural surroundings representing Renaissance style church interiors. The original frame-works are no longer extant, but were probably executed in a contemporary classicizing style.

60 The city in the background is clearly referring to Rome, a city of particular importance to the Tornabuoni family. The mother of Lorenzo Tornabuoni, Francesca Pitti, had died while the family lived in Rome, and she was buried in the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva.

see each saint as representing his own life story and, therefore, being included in the image in the same iconic manner that saints are often grouped around an image of the *Madonna with the Christ child*. On the other hand, we can see the saints as being relevant to the story of the *Visitation*, and that in a meaningful way they should somehow be added to our understanding of the narrative. Whichever alternative we choose, the presence of the saints affects our understanding of the image and places the narrative in a new context.

If we choose to disregard the saints and focus only on the *Visitation*, we are free to incorporate the narrative in the story of Christ, the story of John the Baptist, or the life of Mary. Without surrounding images to guide us in any direction the narrative altarpiece opens itself to all three possibilities. In the case of the altarpiece by Piero di Cosimo, a careful viewer notices that the background contains a number of small-scale narrative images spread around in the landscape. The images refer to events both before and after the *Visitation*, but all together, they form a cycle of the *Infancy of Christ*. The background is, in fact, an example of so-called continuous narrative, and if the *Visitation* in the foreground is incorporated into this sequence of images, it represents a highly unusual case of continuous narrative in an altarpiece of this date.⁶¹ On the other hand, the representation of two anachronistic saints in the foreground seems to contradict such a distinct narrative reading. The composition places them in the foreground with the protagonists of the *Visitation*, and the usage of light and shadows clearly indicates that they share the space with Mary and Elisabeth.

In the Ghirlandaio altarpiece the two female saints on either side of the *Visitation* are not anachronistic, since the two Marys, Mary Jacobi and Mary Salome, were believed to be the half-sisters of the Virgin Mary. It was commonly believed that both Mary Jacobi and Mary Salome were among the women who visited the empty grave and became the first witnesses of Christ's resurrection. These half-sisters were also the future mothers of some of the apostles, and Mary Jacobi, who is depicted behind the Virgin, is apparently pregnant (Kecks 2000, 355). Carrying a future apostle of Christ in her womb she is directing the viewer to events related to the mission of Christ on earth as an adult, and ultimately, to the sacrificial death of Christ. In contrast to the motionless figure of Mary Jacobi, Mary Salome is moving forward with her eyes fixed on the kneeling figure of St Elisabeth. She is directing the viewer's attention towards the centre of the image and Elisabeth's humble attitude.

In both altarpieces the viewer faces a choice between alternative readings. Since the *Visitation* is also about the mystery of the Incarnation, a viewer in the fifteenth century would perhaps not have chosen any of the above-mentioned narratives, but would rather have chosen a devotional attitude, in a sense the traditional way of looking at any altarpiece. In the altarpiece by Piero di Cosimo, the seated saints in the foreground are shown silently concentrating on the acts of reading and writing.

⁶¹ Narrative images related chronologically to the main subject of the altarpiece were traditionally depicted in predella paintings. Occasionally, very small narrative images can be found embedded in the background landscape of altarpieces, but they resemble isolated emblems rather than a chronologically coherent continuous narrative.

These activities stress the importance of contemplating the Word, that is, the eternal truths of the Holy Scripture, and thus engage in non-narrative devotional practices. In the Ghirlandaio altarpiece, on the other hand, Elisabeth acts as a model of a devotional attitude towards the Virgin. She kneels in front of the Virgin and touches her womb with her left hand. The gesture turns the attention towards the body of Christ, hidden in the womb, and invites contemplation on the reality of the Incarnation.

As demonstrated by these examples, the altarpiece provided a new context for the narrative subject, which offered alternative ways of reading and interpreting the image. In a subtle way the narrative content could gravitate towards contemplation. Some art historians have, in fact, argued that altarpieces, regardless of subject, were never meant to be narrative (see, for example, Marrow 1986 and Hope 1990). According to this view, altarpieces primarily functioned as vehicles for devotional practices, and every altarpiece was, therefore, by definition an icon. Such an argument, however, does not provide an explanation for why a narrative subject was chosen by the patron in the first place.⁶² Although a narrative subject such as the *Visitation* encouraged contemplation on the mystery of the Incarnation, it did not give the viewer an opportunity to engage in direct contact with an intercessor in heaven. Rather than presenting a familiar set of saints the narrative altarpiece presented the viewer with a subject that emphasized the particular importance and deeper significance of a certain story.

In a wider perspective, the *Visitation* was only one among a number of other new narrative subjects for altarpieces. Rather than showing the simple figure of a standing saint, increasingly, a crucial moment in a saint's life was singled out and represented in a devotional context, for example, the *Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine*, the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness*, or the *Noli me tangere* rather than a single image of Mary Magdalene. An image of the *Deposition from the Cross* or the *Lamentation over the Dead Body of Christ* highlighted the physical and real presence of the body of Christ even more than the traditional *Crucifixion*.

As demonstrated by the examples mentioned above, the growing number of narrative altarpieces in the churches indicates gradually changing attitudes towards religious imagery. By the fifteenth century laypersons commissioning altarpieces were familiar with a vast number of religious stories, which were amplified with imaginative and emotional content. When this content was carried over to a devotional context, it received a wider significance and took over the function of the icon. Patrons who commissioned altarpieces, the institutions receiving the donation, and, ultimately, the audience for whom the altarpiece was intended, all appreciated the special communicative power of the narrative altarpiece. The fact that it neither excluded, nor demanded a narrative reading at the expense of contemplative devotion worked in favour of choosing a new narrative subject.

⁶² If a patron wanted merely a devotional image to function as the focus of his prayers for salvation, a number of alternatives would have been available to him. A simple image of the *Madonna with the Christ Child* focused on the Incarnation as a devotional theme, too.

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